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ABSTRACT

A survey was designed to collect descriptive information from teachers of severely/profoundly handicapped (S/PH) students in the public schools of Nevada and Utah. Analysis of 50 responses provided information on teacher demographics (including that the majority of teachers were female, held a special education credential and were relatively inexperienced with the S/PH population), student demographics (including that student age ranged from 3 to 22 years with the primary handicapping condition of mental retardation), classroom settings (including that only 20 respondents served six students or less) and teacher attitudes and goals. Among implications were that teachers needed more formal coursework and inservice opportunities, specifically in curriculum structure and behavior management. (CL)

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PERSONNEL SERVING THE SEVERELY/PROFOUNDLY HANDICAPPED:
PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION AND PRIORITIES

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Abstract

The severely/profoundly handicapped (S/PH) student provides a unique and diverse challenge to public education. However, there is some concern regarding the degree to which those teaching the S/PH are qualified to serve such a population, and the difficulties encountered by these individuals in the public education system. The purpose of this survey was to provide a descriptive profile of personnel providing direct, primary service to the S/PH population in the public schools within the states of Nevada and Utah. Data were collected from a closed-ended questionnaire in the areas of: 1) teacher background, 2) student background, 3) classroom setting, and 4) teacher attitudes. Data from 59 questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Implications for educational practice were discussed.

PERSONNEL SERVING THE SEVERELY/PROFOUNDLY HANDICAPPED:

PROFESSIONAL PREPARATION AND PRIORITIES

Quality preservice preparation for teachers of the severely and profoundly handicapped (S/PH) is a major concern for teacher training programs nationwide. Until the last few years most institutions of higher education had not even begun to consider the nature and scope of the skills necessary for teachers of this population, let alone implement an effective training program. Numerous professionals have expressed concern regarding the possible lack of prepared educators for the S/PH in the face of the urgent need created by the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142) (Altman & Meyen, 1976; Burton & Hirshoren, 1979a; Luckey & Addison, 1974; Milne, 1979; Sailor, Guess, & Lavis, 1975; Smith & Arkans, 1974; Stainback, Stainback, Schmid, & Courtneage, 1977; Stainback, Stainback, & Maurer, 1976; Wilcox, 1977; Yearbook of Special Education, 1978). Sontag, Certo, and Button (1979) have complained of the custodial mentality which may result without vigorously trained special education teachers for the S/PH.

In the past, teachers trained in the area of mental retardation have primarily served the mildly and moderately handicapped. The more severely handicapped have had custodial service or, at best, noncertified, poorly supervised teachers. It is naive and irresponsible to assume that teachers trained to work with the more mildly and moderately handicapped can provide adequate service for the S/PH (Horner, 1977; McGrew, 1977; Sontag, Burke, & York, 1973). In an interview with Thomas (1980), Susan and William Stainback emphasized that more severe disabilities require more complex teacher competencies. However, Russo and Stark (1976) reported that only four states certified personnel to work spe-

cifically with the S/PH. The National Association of State Directors of Special Education (1979) indicated that only 11 states had certification procedures for teachers of the S/PH. Although the need for specific, unique educational services for the S/PH is clear and mandated by law, the response to that need is less than clear. Even with the establishment of excellent competency-based programs for preservice training of teachers (Burke & Cohen, 1977; Fredericks, 1979; Horner, 1977; Iacino & Bricker, 1978; Perske & Smith, 1977; Wilcox, 1977), it cannot be assumed that personnel currently providing service to the S/PH are competent and appropriately trained. It is essential to obtain data about current personnel in order to assess the effect of preservice programs and to determine direction for future efforts.

To this date a comprehensive profile of the person currently providing direct, primary service to the S/PH in the public school setting has not been available. There is a paucity of information regarding the background and training of this direct service person, the students served, and the service delivery setting. The purpose of the present study is to provide a descriptive profile of personnel providing direct, primary service to S/PH students in the public schools of two western states. Such information can help gauge the progress that is being made in providing educational services to the S/PH and suggest direction for preervice and inservice training programs. The discussion will also focus on demographic information relative to the population being served under the S/PH label, classroom settings, and teacher attitudes.

Method

Subjects. Subjects in this study were personnel responsible for direct service to S/PH students in the public schools of Nevada and Utah. The Nevada Department of Education (1978) has identified the S/PH population as

"multihandicapped:"

The term multihandicapped means concomitant impairments (such as mentally retarded-blind; mentally retarded-orthopedically impaired etc.). The combination of which causes such severe educational problems that they cannot be accommodated by special education programs solely for one of the impairments. The term does not include deaf-blind children (p. 99).

In Utah, the S/PH are identified as "severely multiply handicapped" (Office of the Utah State Board of Education, 1980) and include the profoundly mentally retarded:

those individuals who present an array of two or more disabilities, each one of which prevents or interferes with normal functioning to the extent that special education procedures are required. These individuals require special education provisions of the type not available in programs designed to serve only one handicap (p. 21).

The term "direct service personnel" does not mean that these individuals must hold a teaching credential in regular or special education. However, they must have been working with students defined as S/PH according to the rules and regulations established within each state. Personnel in classrooms for the educable or trainable mentally retarded, and physically handicapped were excluded. Additionally, any person providing only support or related services was excluded from the subject pool.

Instrument. A questionnaire with cover letter was used to collect data for the study. Both were developed and piloted by the investigators. The questionnaire was constructed to provide descriptive data concerning: 1)teacher background, 2)student background, 3)classroom settings, and 4)teacher attitudes.

Questions were closed-ended with either nominal or ordinal data requested in order to minimize pressure from sensitive questions and to facilitate easy completion. Respondents remained anonymous except for the identification of the state in which they were employed.

Procedures. Initially, the program specialist for the Comprehensive System of Personnel Development in the Utah State Office of Education provided suggestions and access to special education administrators in the two states. In Nevada, the Director of Special Education identified two regional directors. These individuals were contacted by telephone following an introductory letter. Questionnaires were then mailed to them for distribution within their school district. In Utah, questionnaires were distributed in the fall of 1980 to all personnel responsible for direct, primary services to the S/PH through their school principals or program directors. Great emphasis was placed upon the need to identify only personnel responsible for direct, primary service, regardless of their certification or professional title. To encourage this, respondents remained anonymous except for identification of the state in which they were employed. The present authors were concerned that information from state offices of education might identify only certified teachers and, therefore, provide an inaccurate profile of service providers. Unfortunately, anonymity of respondents prohibited use of follow-up procedures. Data were also collected from Idaho and Colorado, but were not considered in this report.

Results and Discussion

A total of 67 questionnaires were distributed in Nevada and Utah with 64 being completed and returned (95.5%). Of those returned, 59 were utilized for data collection and 5 were excluded because they did not meet criteria (Either the students described in the questionnaire did not meet state definitional cri-

teria or the respondent was in an ancillary position rather than providing primary service). There were 13 respondents from Nevada and 46 from Utah who met criteria. Data were analyzed according to the four major areas of concern addressed in the questionnaire.

Teacher demographic information. The vast majority of respondents were female (48, 81%) and under the age of 40 (35, 60%). These results are in agreement with earlier studies by Kelsay (1978), Marozas and May (1980), and Milne (1979). The educational background of the respondents varied considerably with 35 (59%) holding a bachelor's degree, and 16 (27%) holding a master's degree. Of the eight remaining individuals, seven (12%) had some college experience.

The majority of respondents (47, 80%) held a special education credential. Of these 47 individuals, 27 (57%) were also certified in regular education. The most common special education endorsement was in the area of mental retardation with 45 (96%) of the individuals certified in special education holding this credential. The predominance of mental retardation endorsements among teachers of the S/PH is a consistent finding among studies focusing in this area (Milne, 1979).

Data indicated that many personnel were relatively inexperienced with S/PH students. Nearly half (27, 45%) of the respondents had held their present position three years or less, and 42 (71%) individuals had worked in the field of special education three years or less prior to their present job. Preservice training for these direct service personnel was somewhat limited in that only 30 (51%) had completed a university class focusing on S/PH students. Fifteen (25%) of the respondents had no prior training or experience with S/PH prior to accepting their current assignment. Only 13 (22%) of the respondents reported

that they had received inservice training oriented to the S/PH. These results are consistent with the concern expressed by several authors that teachers of the S/PH are often unprepared and inexperienced (Horner, 1977; McGrew, 1977; Sontag, Burke, & York, 1973). It is clear that respondents were not the vigorously trained teachers specified by Sontag, Certo, and Button (1979). There were no respondents who held a credential in severely/profoundly handicapped or multiply handicapped. These results are consistent with the certification categories discussed by Gilmore and Argyros (1977), and Russo and Stark (1976).

The vast majority of respondents (53, 90%) identified themselves as "teachers." The remaining respondents included five teaching associates and one trainer. Personnel salaries ranged between \$5,000 and \$20,000 or more per year with 24 (41%) earning between \$10,000 and \$15,000.

Student demographic information. Student chronological ages ranged from 3 to 22 years. The average age span between the youngest and oldest student in a single classroom was approximately five years. The greatest span was 14 years and the smallest was one year. The majority of respondents (35, 60%) reported that the average developmental age of their students was between 1 and 4 years. Of the remaining respondents, nine (16%) indicated that the developmental level of their population was under 11 months; 12 (21%) reported developmental ages between 5 and 8 years; and only one person (2%) reported the average developmental age of the students exceeded 9 years.

All 59 respondents indicated that their students' primary handicapping condition was mental retardation. The three other major characteristics included physical handicaps (39, 66%), severe communication disorders (39, 66%), and severe behavior disorders (35, 29%). Other problems, including seizure disor-

ders, cerebral palsy, visual impairment, and autism were mentioned by six (10%) of the respondents. A comparison of the present data with previous surveys was not possible since at the time of the investigation no other information in this area was available. The student demographic data in the present study should be interpreted with a great deal of caution because of the inconsistent use of definitional criteria for S/PH students from state to state. However, based upon the data presented, it is clear that service providers must indeed have different skills from those of teachers of the more mildly handicapped. Respondents indicated that over 76% of the students they were serving had developmental ages of less than 4 years. Additionally, since most students in this study exhibited multiple handicapping conditions, personnel in direct service positions must be better prepared to serve the unique and diverse needs of this population.

Classroom settings. Thirty-three (56%) respondents were responsible for classrooms with nine or more students. This represents a considerable student load even with the help of classroom aides and ancillary personnel. Only 20 (34%) respondents were serving six students or less. It was encouraging to note that aides, psychologists, occupational therapists, speech/communication specialists, and special physical educators were available to over 80% of all classrooms in the census. Special schools were the service delivery system for all of the S/PH students reported in this survey. Such centralized service may make the provision of such ancillary personnel possible and more cost effective than other service delivery patterns.

This census also analyzed the extent to which supervision was available to personnel serving S/PH students. Respondents indicated that the principal, or program director, or both were the individuals generally responsible for super-

vision. However, the frequency of supervision varied considerable among respondents. Only nine (15%) individuals reported daily supervision; 18 (31%) reported supervision occurred weekly; six (10%) indicated monthly supervision; eight (14%) were supervised every few months; 12 (21%) were supervised once or twice a year; and five (9%) had never received any supervision whatsoever.

Teacher attitudes. Respondents were asked to rank urgent problem areas in their instructional situation. Of the 59 respondents, three (5%) did not rank items numerically or did so incompletely leaving a total 56 responses analyzed in this area. The availability of curriculum materials was ranked by 28 (48%) of the respondents as the number one problem area in their classroom. Table 1 illustrates specific problem areas and the percentage of respondents selecting the area as the number one problem in their classrooms. Although previous results have suggested that respondents were not well trained prior to their teaching role with S/PH students, these same personnel did not rank their teaching skills as a priority problem. In fact, they indicated that their teaching skills were less of a problem than curriculum, supplies and equipment, student behavior, IEP records, and interaction with parents. Perhaps the lack of appropriate instructional materials serves to mask teaching skill deficits.

Twenty-three (39%) respondents selected the development of self-help skills as the priority program goal for their S/PH students (See Table 2). Although Sontag, Certo, and Button (1979) warned of custodial mentality resulting from untrained teachers, only a small percentage of respondents (10.2%) selected custodial goals as a priority goal area. The majority selected skill development in the areas of self-help, affective behavior, and vocational development as primary goals. The custodial mentality was clearly absent.

All respondents taught in a special day school and 52 (88%) considered this

Table 1

Priority Problem Areas and the Percentage of Respondents Selecting Each Area
(N=56)

Problem Area	Percentage of Respondents Selecting Area as Number One Concern in Classroom
Curriculum	48%
Student Behavior	11%
Supplies and Equipment	9%
IEP Records	9%
Interaction with Parents	5%
Teaching Skills	5%
School Facilities	4%
Interaction with Staff	2%
Other	7%
(i.e. Insufficient Time	
Class Size	
Low Pay	
Student Medical Needs	
Follow-through at Home	
Need for Specialists	
Paraprofessional Development	
Acceptance of the Handicapped	
	<u>100%</u>

Table 2

Number and Percentage of Respondents Selecting
Various Priority Program Goals

Priority Goal Area	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Developing Self-Help Skills	23	39.0
Developing Affective Behavior Skills	18	30.5
Developing Vocational Skills	8	13.5
Developing Academic Skills	4	6.8
Being Loved and Content	3	5.1
Receiving Excellent Care	3	5.1
TOTALS	59	100.0

setting to be the most appropriate placement for their students. No respondent indicated that an institutional setting was the preferred placement for S/PH students.

Burnout, frequently suggested as a problem for those serving S/PH students (Orelove, 1978; Weiskopf, 1980; Wilcox, 1977), did not appear imminent for respondents in this survey if turnover is an indicator of stress (Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1977). A surprising 29 respondents (49%) indicated a desire to serve S/PH students for more than five years, while only five (9%) indicated a desire to leave after the current school year. It is possible, since the majority of respondents are relatively new to their jobs, they have not yet experienced sufficient stress to initiate burnout. However, at the time of the survey, there was no indication of such stress. Kelsay (1979) suggested that older noncertified personnel were more likely to be satisfied with teaching S/PH students than those under the age of 40. Results from this study indicated that no major difference exists between those under 40 and those 40 years and older in regard to the time they intended to continue working with this population (See Table 3).

Implications for Practice

Personnel currently serving S/PH students are deficient in university coursework and other formal training experiences specific to this population. Courses should be offered to develop their competencies in dealing with more severe retardation, physical handicaps, communication disorders, severe behavior disorders, and medical problems. Specific certification in the area of S/PH should be considered along with appropriate training programs for such certification. School districts must regularly assess the inservice needs of teachers, and inservice opportunities must be made available specifically in the areas of curriculum structure and behavior management. Those personnel currently without certification should be encouraged to obtain it. Inservice

Table 3
Number and Percentage of Respondents Desiring to Work
with the S/PH for Various Time Periods

Projected Years Working with S/PH	<u>Respondents Under Age 40</u>		<u>Respondents 40 and Over</u>	
	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Only This Year	3	8.6	2	9.5
2-3 years	11	31.4	8	38.1
4-5 years	2	5.7	2	9.5
More than 5 years	19	54.3	9	42.9
TOTALS	35	100.0	21 ¹	100.0

Note. One respondent gave no age.

¹ Two respondents age 40 and over did not respond to this question.

programs could establish career development ladders for these personnel and for the paraprofessionals who were employed in nearly every classroom surveyed. Administrators also need to develop more expertise with S/PH students in order to offer constructive supervision to classroom personnel. Preservice training for administrators should involve practicum experience in a S/PH classroom. Unless teacher training institutions and the public schools commit to a periodic needs assessment and program modification in the early years of public school service to these students, the "24 hour retarded child" will never be appropriately served.

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